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Study: Stroke Rates Nearly Doubled in Adults Under 55

09/28/2026 // Morgan S. Verity // **1K** Views

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First-time stroke rates among adults ages 20 to 54 in the Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky region rose by about 83% between 1993 and 2020, according to a study published in *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology [1].

Researchers identified 2,076 first-ever strokes over the 27-year period, with the rate climbing from 33.9 to 62.2 cases per 100,000 person-years. The finding adds to a growing body of evidence that cardiovascular disease is no longer confined to older populations.

Stroke is the fifth leading cause of death in the United States, killing approximately 142,000 people annually, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke [2]. While age remains an important risk factor, younger adults can and do experience strokes, with 10% to 14% of all strokes occurring in people under 45 [3].

Ischemic Strokes Drive Increase

Ischemic strokes, the most common type that occurs when a blood vessel in the brain is blocked, accounted for most of the increase in the study. Their rate rose from 23.8 to 47.3 cases per 100,000 person-years over the study period, according to the researchers. Hemorrhagic strokes, which occur when a blood vessel ruptures and bleeds into the brain, did not show the same upward trend.

About 85% of all strokes are ischemic, while the remaining 15% are hemorrhagic, according to "The Facts On File Encyclopedia of Health and Medicine" [4]. The study also found that 30-day mortality after stroke declined modestly from 11.7% to 9.4% between 1993 and 2020, suggesting that acute treatment has improved. However, the report noted that survival does not guarantee full recovery, as stroke can cause lasting changes in movement, speech, memory, cognition and independence [5].

Risk Factors Become More Common Among Younger Stroke Patients

The study also tracked health characteristics of younger adults who experienced strokes and found increases in several cardiovascular risk factors. High blood pressure, diabetes, atrial fibrillation and substance use all became more common. Substance use saw an especially large jump, rising from 4.6% in the early 1990s to 40.2% in 2020, much of which reflected marijuana use, according to the study.

Previous research has linked frequent cannabis use to heart risks, including increased risk of heart attack and stroke [6]. Other studies have pointed to additional factors driving stroke risk in younger populations. Chronic stress has been linked to a 78% higher stroke risk in young women, according to research published in NaturalNews.com [7]. Combined oral contraceptives have been associated with triple the risk of unexplained ischemic strokes in women ages 18 to 49, according to a European study [8].

Researchers caution, however, that the Cincinnati study could not determine whether these factors explain the trend, because it lacked comparable risk-factor data from people who did not have strokes. The study did not include a non-stroke comparison group, limiting causal conclusions.

Context and Limitations

Stroke has historically been viewed as a condition of aging, with most cases occurring in people over 65. However, younger adults can have cardiovascular risk factors that set the stage for stroke.

High blood pressure is a major modifiable risk factor, and it can be present for years without noticeable symptoms. Diabetes also raises the relative risk of stroke, with the risk highest for men at an earlier age and for women at an older age, according to the "Brain Disorders Sourcebook" [9].

The study's limitations include its geographic focus and the absence of a control group for risk factors. Despite these constraints, the findings align with other research showing rising

stroke rates among younger adults.

A 2017 analysis found that stroke hospitalizations rose by 42% for men and 30% for women ages 35 to 44 between 2003 and 2012 [10]. Earlier research showed that strokes among those younger than 55 nearly doubled between 1993 and 2005 [11].

The report advises knowing your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol; staying active; not smoking; and properly managing conditions such as diabetes or atrial fibrillation. Regular physical activity, even when condensed into weekends, has been associated with lower all-cause and cause-specific mortality [12].

Prevention and Early Recognition

Sudden facial drooping, arm weakness, difficulty speaking, vision changes, severe headache, dizziness, or loss of balance warrant immediate medical attention, according to the report. With a stroke, getting treatment quickly can make a major difference. The study authors emphasize that many of the factors shaping cardiovascular and brain health are worth paying attention to decades earlier.

The takeaway from this research is that cardiovascular and brain health habits matter decades earlier than many people assume. Death rates after stroke improved modestly, but survivors may face lasting effects.

For someone who has a stroke at 35 or 45, those effects can shape decades of life. Maintaining healthy blood pressure, avoiding smoking, staying physically active and managing conditions like diabetes or atrial fibrillation remain the most reliable ways to reduce risk, according to the researchers.

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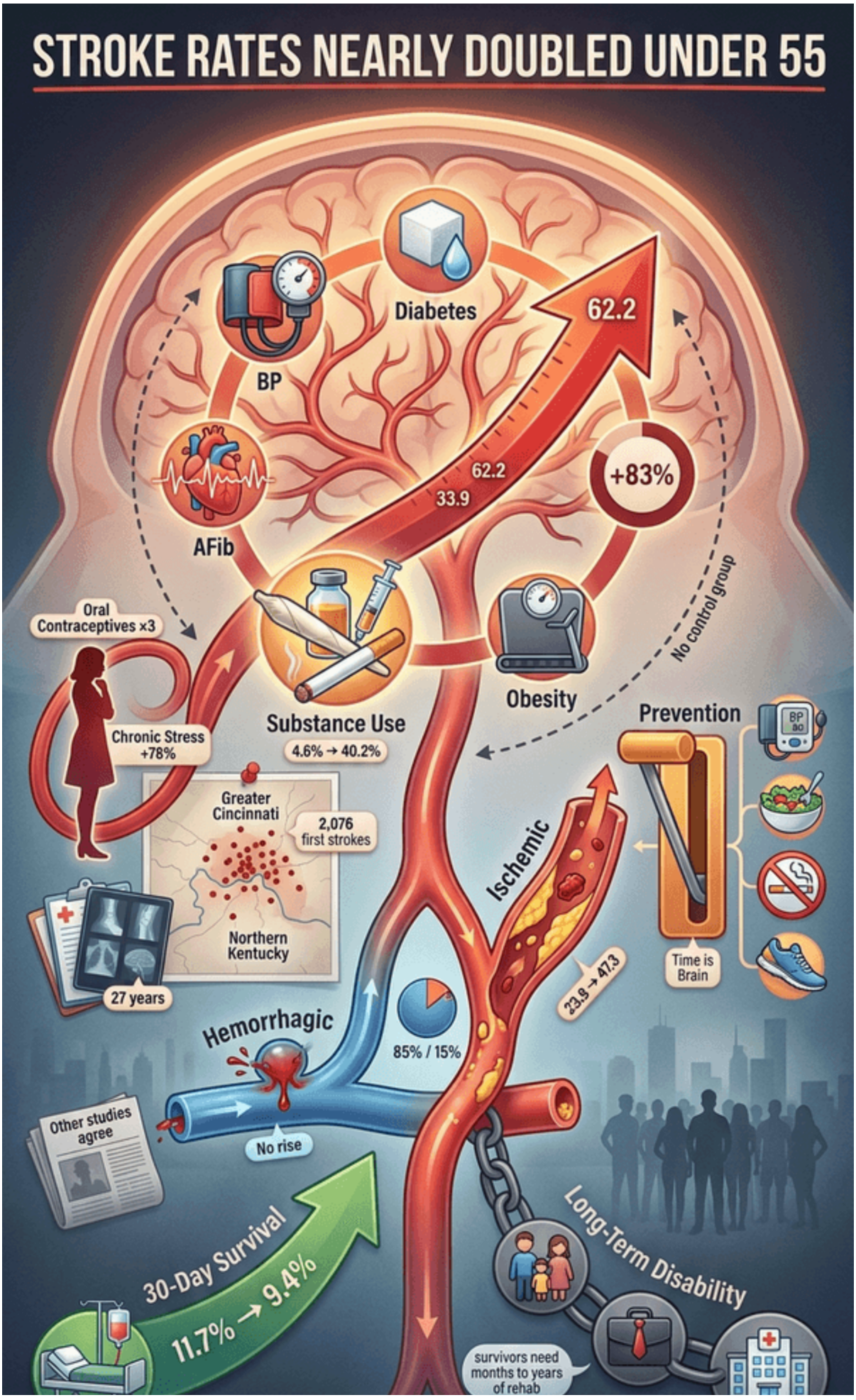
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Time is Brain
23.9 → 47.3
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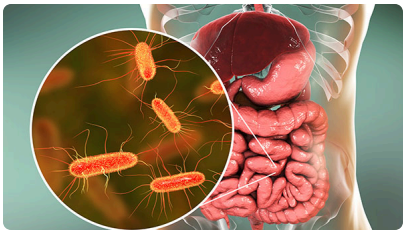

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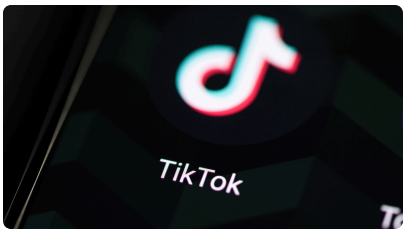

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